
A recent study may have an answer to one of the greatest unsolved mysteries in science - what is the purpose of sleep? The work suggests it's actually about making animals function more efficiently in their environments. Jon Stewart reports:

Pythons, bats and giant armadillos are among the longest sleepers at over 18 hours a day. Human babies need 16 hours, and most of us probably feel we need around eight hours sleep **to function well**.

Professor Jerry Seigel from the University of California, Los Angeles, conducted a study of the sleep times of **a broad range of** animals and found that they **vary widely**. Some, like **migrating birds**, can survive long periods without sleeping at all. He believes that shows sleep evolved **to conserve** energy:

Jerry Seigel: 'It's animals that **are needlessly active** that will not survive, but animals that are most efficient and use their waking time to do **vital** functions, and are otherwise asleep that will survive.'

Sleep helps make best use of **limited resources**. In humans, when we're awake, our brain accounts for 20% of the energy we use when just sitting around. Sleeping also makes us less likely **to get injured** and less likely to be **detected by predators**.

Jon Stewart, BBC News

Vocabulary and definitions

to function well	to live and operate normally
a broad range of	many different
vary widely	are very different
migrating birds	birds that move between two different environments in response to changes in weather and food supply
to conserve	to save, to keep and protect from waste
are needlessly active	move a lot without reason or purpose
vital	essential, most important, impossible to do without
limited resources	here, when there is relatively little food
to get injured	here, to get hurt or hurt oneself accidentally
detected by predators	noticed by those who are likely to hunt and kill you

More on this story: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/humanbody/sleep/>
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/8090730.stm>

Read and listen to the story and the vocabulary online:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/language/wordsinthenews/2009/09/090911_witn_sleep.shtml